

Pope progressive on social teachings

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

No pope in modern times has contributed more to the development of Catholic social teaching than the current Bishop of Rome, John Paul II.

In less than 13 years he has produced three major social encyclicals (*Laborem Exercens* in 1981, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* in 1988, and, most recently, *Centesimus Annus* in 1991), and two other encyclicals with a direct bearing on social questions (*Redemptor Hominis* in 1979 and *Dives in Misericordia* in 1980).

This latest encyclical, *Centesimus Annus*, commemorates the 100th anniversary of Pope Leo XIII's pioneering social encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, issued on May 15, 1891. Pope John Paul II's new encyclical is an eminently worthy addition to a long line of papal, conciliar and episcopal teaching on the social, economic and political implications of the Gospel.

Unfortunately, a few Catholics who have never felt entirely comfortable with the progressive, yet balanced, character of the church's social teachings are now trying to coopt this new encyclical in order to make it read like the editorial pages of *The Wall Street Journal* or the standard fare of *Fortune* magazine.

This is an impossible task. *Centesimus Annus* is utterly consistent not only with

the previous 100 years of official Catholic teaching on the social, economic and political orders, but it is also consistent with this pope's own previous encyclicals on these important subjects.

No fair-minded interpreter could pin a neoconservative label on John Paul II's social teachings. If they can be placed anywhere on the spectrum of economic thought, they are moderately progressive and at times even tend toward the radical.

As I pointed out last week, few people will ever read the new encyclical, but many already have an impression of it through news stories and especially through the pre-emptive strikes of a few neoconservative Op-Ed pieces in at least three major U.S. newspapers.

Fortunately, we don't have to argue with one another about what we think the pope actually said or didn't say in extemporaneous remarks. We have the full text of his encyclicals.

Various diocesan papers have already printed it, and it can also be obtained from *Origins*, 3211 4th Street, N.E., Washington, D.C. 20017-1100 at \$3.50 a copy (it is less expensive when more than one copy is ordered).

The encyclical makes clear that the church *does* have a right and a duty to speak out officially on matters of social, economic and political significance.

Neither this pope nor any of his immediate predecessors have ever countenanced a so-called sacristy-church. The Gospel belongs in the boardroom and in the marketplace as well as in the sanctuary.

Thus, this new encyclical insists, as did previous encyclicals, that the church's social teaching is "an essential part of the Christian message, since this doctrine points out the direct consequences of that message in the life of society and situates daily work and struggles for justice in the context of bearing witness to Christ the savior" (n.5).

Indeed, this social teaching is an expression of a "new evangelization," which the modern world so urgently needs.

And what of the content of this social teaching? Where does it situate itself in terms of recent and current discussions about national, multinational and global economies?

Some neoconservatives — a former secretary of the treasury comes immediately to mind — have in the past publicly ridiculed the U.S. Catholic bishops for their appeal to "economic rights." None exist, it was asserted.

Well, Pope John Paul II insists that economic rights do exist.

According to the new encyclical, there are many economic rights: the right to form labor unions, the right to a limitation

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on working hours, the right to a just wage sufficient to support the worker and his or her family, the right to hygienic conditions in the workplace, the right to legitimate rest, the right of children and women to be treated differently with regard to the type and duration of work (nn. 7 and 8), as well as the right to social security, pensions, health insurance, and compensation in the case of accidents. (n.15).

Many — perhaps most — neoconservatives tend to depreciate the role of labor unions. They express no sorrow or regret over the recent weakening of the labor movement in the United States.

That is not Pope John Paul II's position, however. He declares that the role of trade unions is "decisive" not only in negotiating minimum salaries and working conditions, but also in providing a place "where workers can express themselves" and come "to share in a fully human way in the life of their place of employment" (n.15) and "in the life of their nations" (n.35).

More on the encyclical next week.

People reject Jesus for flimsy reasons

By Father Albert Shamon
Courier columnist

Sunday's Readings: (R3) Mark 6:1-6; (R1) Ezechiel 2:2-5; (R2) 2 Corinthians 12:7-10.

When Stephen gave his great defense of Christianity just before his martyrdom, he climaxed it with these words: "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always oppose the holy Spirit; you are just like your ancestors" (Acts 7:51).

In Ezechiel's day, the spirit branded the prophet's contemporaries as "rebels who have rebelled against me" (R1). In Jesus' day, the Nazoreans were no different from their ancestors. "No prophet is without honor except among his own kindred and in his own house."

In the Gospel, Jesus brought his disciples to his hometown in order to give them a taste of what they might expect from their own peers later on in their ministry, and to prepare them to turn to the Gentiles.

Therefore, after watching him preach in

his hometown synagogue, the Nazoreans were astonished at his doctrine. Their bad will, however, became evident in their reaction to his wisdom and miracles. The facts were there, yet they could not explain them naturally. But the facts were distasteful. What did the Nazoreans do? Did they accept them? No. They simply got angry. Passion triumphed over reason.

They asked each other, "Can you believe what you are hearing? Isn't this the carpenter?" This is the only passage in the Gospels that reveal this fact of the hidden life of Jesus. They thought they knew him. How mistaken they were!

"Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary?" they asked. Customarily, a son was described in terms of the father. Apparently, Joseph was dead at the time. Or Mark was underscoring the fact that Jesus was the only son of Mary — a fact indicated by the Greek.

When the villagers spoke of Jesus as the brother of James, Josés, Judas and Simon, they did not mean they were his real broth-

ers. The Hebrews had no word for cousin or relative; they used the term "brother" (*ah* or *aha*). In the poem of the Man-God, we learn that Josés was born 20 B.C. and named after his uncle, St. Joseph; Simon was born in 14 B.C.; James was born in 9 B.C.; and Judas was born in 8 B.C.

These four were children of Mary, the wife of alphaeus of Clopas, the brother of Joseph. In Mark 15:40, Josés and James are described as the sons of Mary of Clopas. In selecting a successor to Judas, the Scripture says, "Peter stood up in the midst of the brothers and he said, 'My brothers, the ... (Acts 1:15-16). 'Brother,' you see, was an all-inclusive term to embrace near and dear friends.

"So they found him too much for them." Pride and envy prevented the Nazoreans from acknowledging that their former "equal" was their superior and teacher.

Just outside Nazareth, on the brow of a steep cliff, is the church of Our Lady of Spasms. It marks the spot where Mary



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stood as she watched her countrymen try to throw Jesus over the cliff.

Today, many Catholics — like those Jews of old — are rejecting their rich heritage for the crumbs of fundamentalism. This is irrational. The fact is that every sect has had a beginning, but it was more than a thousand years after Christ. The sect was also founded by a man or woman, who was not Christ or one of his apostles. Moreover, they use a Bible that was assembled and preserved by the Catholic Church and inspired by it alone.

The tragedy of these fundamentalists is that so often these fallen-aways go to their neighbors instead of a Catholic priest or theologian. If I had a serious malady, would it make sense to go to a neighbor instead of a doctor? It is a question of the blind leading the blind.

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